

# Snake Eaters and the Light: Maramuni Valley People from the Underside of History

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## 1. Introduction

The people in the Maramuni Valley live in an isolated rural area two or three days walk from the nearest town – Wabag, the main town in the Enga Province of Papua New Guinea. People in the urban setting of Wabag refer to Maramuni as the “back page” of Enga, and to the people, using the derogatory term “snake eaters (*kanopato nenge*).” These so-called “snake eaters” are not some small insignificant “lost tribe”. They comprise at least 16,000 people, children, women, and men, members of clans living in rural hamlets scattered on the precipitous sides of a series of mountain valleys located between the Highlands and the Sepik Plains.

After a spate of tribal fighting almost a decade ago all government services in Maramuni ceased.<sup>2</sup> There are (the remains of) school buildings but no teachers, a police post but no police, (deteriorating) health facilities but no health workers. Pregnant women either take the two or three-day walk to be near the Wabag town hospital and medical services or else remain, hoping that there will be no complications with the delivery. The maternal death rate is high. Men die too at the hands of young men with their guns. Local people refer to life in Maramuni in terms of darkness in contrast to the light of modernity seen in Wabag town with its (unreliable) electric power, stores where one can buy food, and relative law and order maintained by police force.

Maramuni is not unique. In many ways it exemplifies the marginalised state of rural Papua New Guinea. One encounters similar conditions in Goilala in the Central Province or parts of West New Britain in the New Guinea Islands. More than 80% of Papua New Guinea’s population of over 7 million people lives in rural areas. Most of the so-called development is seen in the Port Moresby and in the vicinity of extractive industry projects such as the Exxon-Mobil Liquified Natural Gas project. It is ironical how Port Moresby residents in between power outages, now bemoan the daily traffic congestion in the capital when in fact it is an isolated city with no roads linking to other parts of the country. Meanwhile people in rural provinces dream about road access, or survey the deteriorating remains of what used to be a road built by overseas logging companies to extract the indigenous people’s valuable timber.

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<sup>2</sup> At Christmas 2004 the Officer in Charge of the Maramuni Health Centre was killed after an argument over a kerosene lamp. After that incident, all health services were withdrawn and have never been restored.

The earliest Christian missionaries (Catholic and Lutheran) first came to Maramuni in the 1960s --fifty years ago. Many people were baptised. Today a zealous, hard-working and well-liked SVD missionary priest is still based in Maramuni. But there are few viable Christian communities and many people, particularly the young, show little interest in the Church. Do the Maramuni people need a new evangelisation that focuses on the christianization of traditional culture and a more profound explanation of the catechism (as noted by the recent Synod of Bishops in Rome)? Will they be inspired by devotions such as the Legion of Mary and Divine Mercy? Perhaps... But I wonder how such laudable efforts take seriously the experience of marginalised people? From the classical Anselmian definition of theology, if theology is faith seeking understanding, then doing theology presumes faith. But in order to appreciate faith in the Maramuni context we might well begin with the questions and issues of those on the margins – in which case it is not an issue of belief or non-belief but more the sense of being non-persons. How do these “non-persons” encounter the reign of God when their principle life issues have to do with the economic, the social and the political? These issues come from the world in which they believe and hope, live and die. My theological reflection in this paper is grounded in people’s experience of such issues.

## 2. Non-Persons

For people in the developing world, forms of individualism and rationalism characteristic of modernity and especially neoliberal economic policies tend to mean new and refined forms of exploitation for those so-called “developing” countries that are the source of oil, gas, timber and minerals. Trends in contextual theologies, particularly theologies of liberation have sought to have such people emerge from a culture of silence so that they might be considered seriously, not as the object of theological reflection but as its agents. Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez refers to marginalized people in the shadow of the “underside of history” as “non-persons.”<sup>3</sup> It is not that they are truly non-persons, but he refers to them as such because of the way they are treated by those with political and socio-economic power. According to Gutiérrez the principal theological question for these non-persons is not “How can we believe in God in the world of technology and science” but rather, “How can we relate to a personal God in a world that denies our personhood.” I would take the question even further and suggest that the principal theological question in the Maramuni context is “How can we emerge from darkness and live in the light?” Theological reflection based on such a question requires considering the political, social, and economic structures of society as the context in which theological questions may be raised.

It is also said that theology in the so-called third world is about seeking the truth not in terms of faith and reason but in terms of faith and life.<sup>4</sup> I would state it in even more practical terms. The truth being sought need not be seen in terms of faith and life, but as a condition of faith *in* life. Even though one of the fonts of theology is Divine Revelation that deals with universal truths – these are not external to history. From the perspective of practical theology, people’s lives are part of the act of theological reflection itself and the truth that comes from God will emerge as enlightenment from a deeper appreciation of the human condition in any given context.

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<sup>3</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll, Orbis books (1988) xxix.

<sup>4</sup> Sergio Torres, “Preface” to *Doing Theology in a Divided World*, Maryknoll, Orbis books (1985) x.

### 3. Political, Social and Economic Structures

There are over 16,000 people residing in Maramuni. Also thousands of people from Maramuni have migrated for short or long-term stays in towns such as Wabag, Mount Hagen and Port Moresby. Earlier this year I conducted a survey among people from Maramuni staying in the towns of Wabag and Mount Hagen in order to assess their attitudes to the margins in Maramuni relative to life centred in an urban environment. My assistant interviewed 50 people 27 men and 23 women, all adults, between 22 and 63 yrs old. All said they belonged to a Christian church: 31 Catholic, 12 Lutheran, 6 Seventh Day Adventist, one Apostolic and one Christian Apostolic Fellowship. In order to come out from Maramuni, 11 had come on the weekly Missionary Aviation Fellowship flight (costing about AUD 140). The others had walked. Some had come for a short time in the town (a month or two). Others had been living away from Maramuni for many years and when asked, were unsure when they would return.

Why had they left Maramuni to come to town?

- Access to health services 13
- To meet with other people or for family matters (such as attending a funeral) 12
- Employment or Business 5
- Escaping from tribal fighting 5
- Access to educational services 3
- Others said that they had come to get paid (a magistrate), to join a political campaign, or to just “go around town.” One Seventh Day Adventist said he had come out to be a missionary.

What do they like about town? They appreciate having access to medical services and with police presence they experience a degree of law and order in the town. Several mentioned how they enjoyed having electric power and light, and to be able to communicate using mobile phones. However, they were not so happy about having to pay for food, overcrowding in houses, and a number said how they disliked having to deal with drunks and thieves found in urban areas.

What did they like back home in Maramuni? The overwhelming majority liked the fact that food and water is “free” and that “money remains in one’s pocket for a long time.” But they lamented the high price of storegoods such as soap and salt, they decried the lack of services there -- particularly lack of health services, and said how they felt threatened by tribal fighting.

These seem to be very practical concerns and hardly theological. But maybe they are! If the principal theological question is “How can we emerge from darkness and live in the light” then we need to consider what the people consider light and darkness and how they understand life.

Interviewer: “Some people call Maramuni a place of darkness, is it true?”

Interviewee: “Yes, because others have all the needed services whereas we do not have in Maramuni and that’s why they call us people living in darkness.

Human beings live in light and snakes live in darkness therefore when they call us snake-eaters, they are referring to us as people living in darkness without light.

Actually we are snake eaters and most of the time we feel shame, down hearted, and are afraid to go around, and we hide ourselves here in this forest because we actually are from this area where there is no service.”

#### 4. Light in Darkness – John 3

I understand that doing theology involves two principal stages, first a consideration of life experience, and second, examining that experience critically in the light of the Divine Word.<sup>5</sup> Having described the Maramuni experience briefly above I now turn to the Word of Scripture. Light and darkness appear as symbols of belief and unbelief particularly in the Fourth Gospel. In John chapter 3 we read the account of Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night. Nicodemus is a sympathetic but “unbelieving” Jewish teacher. He comes by night – night from a Johannine perspective representing separation from the presence of God (John 11:10, 13:30). Nicodemus seems like a well-meaning person, and he appears again near the end of the Fourth Gospel helping at Jesus’ burial (John 19:39).

The dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus alternates between Jesus’ offer of new birth (vv 3, 5-8) and Nicodemus’ resistance (vv 4, 9). Nicodemus questions Jesus’ insistence that no one can see the kingdom of God without being “born again.” The Greek term *anōthen*, sometimes translated as “born again” does not refer to the way “born again” is often used in our time as an individual’s private moment of conversion. The term *anōthen* means both “born again” and “born from above”. Being “born again” refers to new life associated with Baptism and the second meaning of birth from above alludes to the lifting up of Jesus on the cross. John has used a word with a double meaning that holds anthropology and Christology in a subtle balance: one cannot know the true meaning of human life without grounding it in reality of Jesus’ life.

Nicodemus comes to speak with Jesus having witnessed signs that appear to him to come from God. John has Jesus provide a radical new interpretation with his offer of new birth through his death, resurrection and ascension. In verse 14 we hear how just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. The “lifting up of the serpent” from Numbers 21:8-9 refers to saving the complaining Israelites who were dying from venomous snake bites in the desert. It also has a salvific dimension, applied in John’s gospel to Christ.<sup>6</sup> So in John chapter 3 Jesus is saying to Nicodemus that he will see the

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<sup>5</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez says that the first stage is “lived faith,” Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from our Own Wells*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, (2003) 4. I prefer to simply consider life experience and to bring the light of faith to bear in the second stage of doing theology.

<sup>6</sup> The serpent of bronze on a pole held by Moses is similar to the Rod of Asclepius in ancient Greek mythology consisting of a serpent entwined around a staff. The Rod of Asclepius symbolizes the healing arts by combining the serpent, which in shedding its skin is a symbol of rebirth and fertility, with the staff, a symbol of authority, befitting the god of Medicine. This symbol is now used as the symbol of western medicine. This statement in John 3:14 is one of three statements referring to “lifting up” (see also: John

real signs of the kingdom of God if he can be born (again) from above, believing in the one who was lifted up. The offer of new life -- to be born *anōthen* – again/from above has its source in the offer of Jesus own life. Obviously John is writing from the viewpoint of post-resurrection faith

The one who believes will have eternal life. Eternal life (*zōē aiōnios*) in the Fourth Gospel is one of the dominant metaphors to describe the change in human existence brought about by faith in Jesus (3:36, 4:14, 6:27, 17:4). “Eternal” here does not mean mere endless duration of existence, but a way of describing life as lived in the unending presence of God. To speak of the newness available to the believer as “eternal life” focuses eschatological expectations on current realities. Eternal life is not something held in abeyance until the believers’ future, but begins in the believer’s present.

John continues (v.19) that the light has come into the world, but that people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. The presence of Jesus as incarnate Word in the world confronts the world with a decision – to believe or not to believe, and making that decision is the moment of judgement. Verses 19-21 present this judgement and decision in terms of light and darkness (see John’s Prologue 1:5, 9-10). To love the darkness more than the light is the same as not believing, resulting in judgement (v 19). Nicodemus may not have preferred darkness, but in the Gospel text he does not appear to be enlightened. He was unable to believe, so he came and left again in darkness.

## 5. Encountering God in Daily life

What is new birth from above for people on the underside of history? I understand the term “history”, not as anamnesis or remembrance, but to include the total experience of created being, from the beginning into the future. Human history is that experience in the life of human beings, both past, present and future. As human beings we face openness to the future and the chance of making the world a better place.<sup>7</sup> Our task as committed believers is to engage with history, recognising the opportunity to be part of the growth of the reign of God. From a theological perspective we not only reflect on the world, but also try to be part of the process through which the world is transformed.

From the extracts from interviews in section 3 above, one learns how people of Maramuni do not like to be regarded as “snake eaters” on the “back page” of history. They would prefer to be seen as persons with human dignity. They wish to emerge from the underside of history and to share in what they consider the enlightenment of modern development such as health services. It is quite natural that people want to be respected and to share in the good things of life. I consider such natural desires as deep human yearnings that are fundamental to spirituality. We do not need to enter into some “supernatural” plane in order to engage in theological reflection. I say this affirming that there is a close relation between salvation and human freedom, the

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8,28, 12:32-34). These three sayings may be seen as the Johannine analogue to the three passion predictions in the Synoptic Gospels.

<sup>7</sup> Thus Gustavo Gutiérrez noting an observation by Schillebeeckx refers to the “hermeneutics of the kingdom of God” consisting especially “in making the world a better place.” Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 11.

kingdom of God and the building up of the world.<sup>8</sup> Human freedom and wellbeing is salvific, even if it is not the whole of salvation.

I try to avoid dualities and am not looking for a “spiritual” meaning to history. Nor do I want to promote some form of theology of prosperity. However I see human social realities such as peace, justice, love, and freedom as partial fulfillments of the reign of God. Without such realities it would be hard to imagine the growth of the kingdom.

Human beings are not born to be “snake-eaters” living in darkness. The Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us (Jn 1:14) and history becomes the location of our encounter with God in Christ. From this perspective the desire of people not to be marginalised, but to be recognised is theologically relevant. Their powerlessness is also theologically significant. Lack of social peace, and political, economic, and cultural inequalities, run contrary to a world that reflects God’s love.

I do not think that I am being “practical” and horizontalist at the expense of the transcendent. Nor am I neglecting interior and spiritual attitudes. Spirituality is not superimposed upon human qualities such as love. Love for God is unavoidably expressed in love of one’s neighbour and we find God in our encounters with others, especially the poor and the marginalised.

## **6. So what about Maramuni?**

To continue to live in darkness as though it were their fate would be sinful. The Maramuni people are presented with a chance to move into the light. What will motivate them? Will it be merely a desire for modern-day comforts or is it truly a desire to emerge from the underside of history, to be agents of their own history with faith in life?

Christians are not meant to be hiding from difficulty and “finding refuge in a Christ that once lived on earth and whose return is a distant eventuality”.<sup>9</sup> Rather, accompanied by the Spirit of Christ it is a matter of building God’s Kingdom which is at hand, immanent in the world and also with us.

How would Maramuni people see signs of God’s kingdom? I put that question to the parish priest. He responded: a functioning school with happy students and a functioning health centre where people could find relief from illness. That would be the first sign!

Those concerns mentioned might seem very worldly. However, the truth that comes from God emerges as enlightenment in a renewed appreciation of the human condition. In the context of Maramuni that enlightenment reveals that new or eternal life is offered to those people who have the willingness to make their own history and to work with God to build our earth. In other words, people can be part of the answer to their prayers. The question is, how are they to develop that potential into lived experience?

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<sup>8</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 29.

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Narokobi, “The Kingdom and Melanesian Human Struggles,” in Helen O’Brien [ed], “Your Kingdom Come,” *Point: Partnership in Mission and Development* (Goroka: Melanesian Institute, 1980) 63.

I have three things to say to the people of Maramuni.

First, they have a God-given right to move from the margins and be recognised as people with dignity. That includes access to health care, education and protection by agents of the law. These things will not come from the heavens, but they will emerge out of the darkness through the will and work of people who are motivated by being born again and in so doing cease to be on the underside of history. The bright lights of modern technology may seem wondrous, but at the same time they should be aware of the mixed effects of globalization and ecological issues.

Second, the life from above is not from some “supernatural” other world, but to be found within their present existence. It can be experienced as renewed understanding of the purpose and meaning of history pointing towards the future, and the part played by Christian commitment. Poorly understood spiritualization can influence us to forget the human consequences of the eschatological promises and the power to transform unjust social structures that they imply. Eschatology does not refer simply to “spiritual” realities. The grace-sin conflict and the coming of the kingdom are historical, temporal, earthly, and social realities, and committed Christians are called to be part of that – not only a part but to take a prophetic stance. Peace, justice, love and freedom are not simply internal attitudes. They are social realities that are part of our daily existence. To become free in that context calls for being born anew to realise one’s part in that. The elimination of marginalisation and exploitation is a sign of the coming of the reign of God.<sup>10</sup>

Third, what about the snake? The passage from John helps us realise that the snake is not always a symbol of evil and death. Just as the cross is an image of death but a symbol of life, so the symbol of the snake can also carry several meanings. Those Maramuni who accept their Christian commitment to make the world a better place motivated by love of God and neighbour do not need to be concerned about whether people label them as “snake eaters”. If through the Christian community peace can come to Maramuni, the snake can take on new meaning. Perhaps they could learn from the Rainbow Snake Theology from Aborigines in Australia how to develop their symbolic appreciation of the snake image. However the transformation comes about, it does not mean simply to spiritualise the eschatological promises in hope for utopia, but to give them meaning and fulfillment today through a new sense of purpose that can transform historical reality and respond to the cry of the woman at the beginning of this paper:

*“My jaw aches from praying to God to send police to Maramuni or any form of peace to prevail in Maramuni where we can live in peace.”*

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<sup>10</sup> See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 97.